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ABSTRACT

Research by Conrad and Blackburn on program quality in master's departments at regional universities was replicated and extended. The present sample doubled the number of departments (from 45 to 81), increased the number of institutions (from 14 to 33), and added a different state (i.e., the original study consisted of two southern states). The same general variables emerged as the strongest predictors, but strengths were lower. The six cluster variables that emerged were: curricular content, faculties with degrees from local institutions; scholarly productivity; scope (the number of baccalaureate, masters, and doctoral degree programs); the number of library holdings; and the percentage of faculty under age 40 and the percentage of faculty without tenure. The results did not vary by state. Although scholarly productivity was the greatest predictor of program quality, the relationship was not a strong one. This indicates that traditional indicators of quality may be valid, but they carry a different weight at regional institutions. Scholarly activity seems to be of greater importance at elite institutions. (SW)

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RESEARCH NOTE: DIMENSIONS OF PROGRAM QUALITY IN REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES

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RESEARCH NOTE: DIMENSIONS OF PROGRAM QUALITY IN REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES

Abstract

This study replicated and extended research by Conrad and Blackburn on program quality in regional universities. The sample doubled the number of departments, increased the number of institutions and programs, and added a different state from the two in their study. The same general variables emerged as the strongest predictors, but strengths were lower. When "state" did not load in the regression analysis, the inference is that generalizability is warranted.

RESEARCH NOTE: DIMENSIONS OF PROGRAM QUALITY IN REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES

Introduction

Nearly all of the research on program quality in higher education has been conducted on doctoral departments in highly reputed research universities. An exception is a recent study by Conrad and Blackburn (1985). They determined correlates of program quality for M.A. departments in regional universities. Not surprisingly, faculty attributes and productivity correlated with program quality, but to a lesser extent (R^2=.28). In contrast Hagstrom (1971) and others have accounted for more than 75% of the variance of Ph.D. program quality with the faculty dimensions alone. Conrad and Blackburn had to introduce student, program, and facilities variables to increase predictive power but still could not approach the variance levels found for doctoral programs in research universities. Regional institutions simply do not have the visibility the elite enjoy and hence the reputational component that predicts program quality at research universities. For the majority of higher education programs in this country, quality is a more complex phenomenon.

There are, however, limitations to the Conrad and Blackburn study. While they started with 110 programs in 22 institutions, missing data reduced their final analyses to 45 programs in 14 institutions. These covered five different departments -- English, mathematics, chemistry, history and education. That the universities were in but two contiguous states in the South also endangers generalization of their findings.

The current study doubled the number of departments and replicated them in a third state, one whose social makeup and higher education system is appreciably different from the other two. The number of institutions was expanded to 33 and the number of programs increased to 81.

This research note displays the new findings and discusses their implications.

Results

The same six cluster variables that emerged in the Conrad and Blackburn study were the strongest predictors in this expanded study. They were:

Curricular Content

This variable, expressed as the number of undergraduate and graduate programs in the sciences, was an indicator of the research and hard sciences orientations of the institutions.

Local

This variable was expressed as the percentage of faculties' highest degrees granted at institutions from within the state and as the percentage of faculties' highest degrees granted at institutions within Southern Regional Educational Board states. "Inbreeding," or faculties with degrees from "local" institutions, is considered a positive attribute at elite institutions but a liability at other types.

Scholarly Productivity

This cluster variable includes several measures of publication productivity: publishing rate of faculty (percentage with four or more), publications in the last five years, mean publications from 1974-1979, publications average from 1968-1973, mean yearly publication rate for the last five years, mean number of book reviews in the last five years, and mean number of conference papers in the last five years. High publication rates, especially current publications, correlate with high quality in the reputational studies.

Scope

This cluster includes the total number of baccalaureate degree programs, total number of masters degree programs, and total number of doctoral degree programs. This set of variables measures the breadth of programs, the mix of degrees, and is an indirect indicator of size. Larger departments receive higher ratings in reputational studies of doctoral programs.

Library

The number of holdings is also an indirect indicator of the research capabilities and size. This measure does not evaluate the quality of holdings; however, a large number of holdings is more likely to include a wide range and diverse mix of publications.

Youth

These measures include the percentage of faculty under age forty and the percentage of faculty without tenure. These variables are indicators of inexperience which, it is hypothesized, may detract from program quality. Ratings of doctoral programs find positive quality correlates for senior, tenured faculty.

For the most part the strength of this study's relationships is weaker, as can be seen in Table 1 which displays the

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Insert Table 1 about here

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correlations found in both studies. Again, contrary to the studies of research university Ph.D. departments, both local and younger faculty correlate positively rather than negatively.

As in the previous study, when the six cluster variables are entered in a stepwise regression, scholarly productivity and curricular content have the highest loadings. Their R^2's, however, are small, even lower than the values Conrad and

Blackburn obtained (although they did not have enough cases for a regression analysis). See Table 2.

(Insert Table 2 about here)

Finally, the "state" dummy variables were put into the stepwise regression program with an option to enter. None of the state variables entered the equation. It is concluded that, although the states differed in some ways (e.g., percentage of faculty over forty years of age), the relationship among the other independent variables was not dependent on state.

One important aspect of this study is the non-selection of the variable state in the stepwise regression of the 36 independent variables on program quality. Although all three state systems consist of regional institutions, two states are considered southern, while the third state is not identified as such. Before adding the third state, the sample was restricted to the South and had much less potential for generalizability. The addition of a non-southern state which does not vary in a statistically significant way from the southern states allows broader interpretation of the results.

Conclusions

Despite some obvious limitations, this research represents progress in the assessment of program quality. When the study

expanded on the Conrad and Blackburn study by adding disciplines and increasing the number of programs, the same variables emerged as the highest correlates of program quality. Nor did these results vary by state. It was found that although scholarly productivity is the greatest predictor of program quality, the relationship is not a strong one. This indicates that traditional indicators of quality may be valid, but they carry a different weight at regional institutions. For example, scholarly activity, an important aspect of quality at all universities, seems to be of greater importance (weight) at elite institutions. Future research should continue to further define program quality, particularly the multifaceted nature of program quality in regional institutions.

References

Conrad, C., & Blackburn, R. T. (1985). Correlates of departmental quality in regional colleges and universities. American Educational Research Journal, 22, 279-195.

Hagstrom, W. O. (1971). Inputs, outputs and the prestige of university science departments. Sociology of Education, 44, 375-397.

Table 1

Pearson Correlations Between Program Quality and Cluster Variables

Cluster Variables	(This Study)	(Conrad & Blackburn)
Curricular Content	.25*	.46** - .54**
Local	.09	.23 - .27
Scholarly Productivity	.23*	.10 - .36
Scope	.03	.09 - .17
Library	.07	.15
Youth	.12	.23

*p < .05

**p < .01

Table 2

Stepwise Regression with Program Quality

Step No.		6 Combined Variables and DQUAL (This Study)		(Conrad and Blackburn)
		R	R^2	R^2
1	Scholarly Productivity	.31*	.10	.28
2	Curricular Content	.39*	.15	.31*

*p < .05